

Action Items

The results of the evaluation indicate that each of the corridors analyzed have characteristics that support the implementation of high capacity transit, although the Camden corridor should receive priority consideration. Corridor population densities, the strength of downtown Columbia as a regional destination, and the proximity of activity centers to the existing freight rail lines help to create a positive environment for rail services.

A series of recommendations was developed that must be implemented regionally in order to maximize the effectiveness of commuter rail or any other form of high capacity transit:

• Support regional transit and secure stable local funding for transit

Although support for transit is on the rise in the Central Midlands region, transit service funding still faces an uphill battle. A stable source of local funds is needed to ensure that CMRTA can continue to provide effective and efficient transit service throughout the region. Supporters of commuter rail should fully strive to ensure CMRTA remains a viable system, because commuter rail service will not be possible without a strong regional bus transit system in place.

• Adopt land use ordinances and policies encouraging transit-supportive development

It is important for jurisdictions in the region to recognize the connection between land use decisions and transportation system impacts. Encouraging residential development around station sites would help to expand potential ridership, and additional commercial areas could serve as destinations for residents of other areas.

• Develop interim transit service in corridors

As a first step toward rail service, a continual effort to improve upon the SmartRide bus service must be made to increase the attractiveness of the service to potential passengers. Increased frequency and hours of service, station amenities, passenger information systems, and techniques to give the transit vehicle a competitive advantage over the automobile are needed to expand the attractiveness of the service and make it operate more like a rail service.

• Allocate resources to advance the planning process, including development of a regional transit model

A full-scale travel demand model with a transit network will be required to advance any major transit investments in the region. In the coming years, CMCOG should allocate sufficient funding resources to enable the development of an expanded and updated regional model.

• Identify and preserve potential station sites

Because of its capability to transition from bus services to rail services using the same station areas, station sites along the Camden corridor should have top priority for preservation. Formalizing the parking facilities served by existing and future services will be critical to the development of ridership and will also help preserve station sites for future commuter rail.

• Coordinate on a continual basis with freight rail operators

CSX and Norfolk Southern representatives have been made aware of this initial feasibility assessment. Once one of the corridors is advanced into more detailed phases of analysis, CMCOG should engage the railroads into that process. It is important to clarify and maintain expectations on both sides.

• Seek a "champion" to advocate for transit interests

The foundation for commuter rail in the Midlands is the need for a "champion". In all of the peer cities where commuter rail is gaining momentum, there is a Governor, Mayor, community or business leader, or some other stakeholder that has led the advocacy for transit at the local level. This advocate must be a highly-regarded local resident who has the knowledge, charisma, and determination to rally local citizens to support transit and commuter rail.

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Central Midlands Commuter Rail Feasibility Study

Project Background

The Central Midlands Council of Governments (CMCOG) conducted a planning study to assess the feasibility of commuter rail and other high-capacity transit modes (such as Bus Rapid Transit) in the Central Midlands region. A previous planning study completed in 2000 identified three corridors in the region that exhibited characteristics suitable for some type of commuter rail investment:

- Newberry to Columbia;
- Camden to Columbia; and
- Batesburg-Leesville to Columbia.



This next phase of study was commissioned to take a closer look at these three corridors and to establish priorities for investment in some type of high capacity transit. The Central Midlands region has grown in both population and employment like other cities in the southeastern United States, and has begun to experience traffic congestion in a number of areas. Commuter rail is deemed as a long range transportation option in the three selected corridors, but the region is at the point where a discussion about major transit investments is both warranted and timely.

Although the 2000 study indicated that commuter rail is not anticipated to be feasible in the near term, this study is revisiting these projections to establish an action plan in preparation for service when it is deemed to be feasible. The SmartRide express bus service operating from Newberry and Kershaw County can be used as a starting point for future high-capacity service, and this plan advocates a strategy for gradually building upon these services to create higher-level transit options and associated strategies.

This study provides CMCOG with the information needed to determine if more detailed planning is warranted related to commuter rail in the region. In recognition of the strenuous planning process associated with major transit investments, this study provides immediate benefit by outlining a series of steps that can be taken now to build toward future high-capacity transit service.

Connection to High Speed Rail

In addition, this study also examined two potential rail connections between Columbia and the proposed Southeast High Speed Rail Corridor that is slated to travel through the Upstate of South Carolina between Atlanta and Washington, DC. This connection would serve as a passenger link between the Columbia area and a terminal point in either Charlotte or Spartanburg, both of which lie along the primary corridor for the Southeast High Speed Rail service.

Based on the projected infrastructure costs in each corridor, it appears that the Columbia to Charlotte corridor offers a more effective opportunity for connecting to the potential Southeast High Speed Rail line. The caveat to this statement is that if improvements were to already be made to the Spartanburg corridor enabling commuter rail service to Newberry, the additional costs of extending service to Spartanburg would be less than the costs of establishing new service to Charlotte. Furthermore, there may be additional business ties between Columbia and Charlotte that could be strengthened with a rail connection.

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Corridor Evaluation

A technical evaluation process was used to compare the merits of the three individual corridors and to determine the “most promising” corridor, so that an implementation plan and action items can be developed according to the unique characteristics of each corridor. In a larger sense, the evaluation process also assesses the merits of high-capacity transit in general, so that strategies can be developed to prepare the Central Midlands region for future implementation.

Potential Ridership

- Based on estimated patronage obtained through sketch planning model developed for this project
- Uses data from CMCOG regional travel demand model in conjunction with estimated highway / transit costs
- Scenarios include commuter rail service on one corridor and enhanced bus on remaining two corridors
- Commuter rail ridership was projected for each of the three corridors
- Ridership projections are general in nature; shown as a range to illustrate the uncertainty at the level of detail

Rank	Corridor	Potential Ridership (daily boardings)
1	Camden	1,900 – 2,300
2	Newberry	1,200 – 1,500
3	Batesburg-Leesville	600 - 800

Access / Land Use

- Access to stations based on “catchment areas”; indicates extent to which people are likely to travel to a rail station
- Total population and number of high-income households calculated for each catchment area; indicative of potential rail passengers
- Land use support based on the presence of (or potential for) complementary land uses around stations
- Subjective rating assigned to each station area to indicate opportunities for transit-supportive development

Rank	Corridor	2025 Population (in catchment areas)	2000 High-Income Households ⁽¹⁾ (in catchment areas)	Land Use Rating
1	Camden	131,854	15,633	Average
2	Newberry	93,644	11,499	Average
3	Batesburg-Leesville	67,277	6,060	Average

Cost of Implementation

- An order-of-magnitude capital cost was calculated for each corridor
- Projected cost includes track improvements, station construction, train sets, and associated improvements
- Costs are conceptual; would need to be refined in more detailed planning

Rank	Corridor	Comments
1	Newberry	Highest level of participation at forums; positive comments from citizens
2	Camden	Medium level of participation at forums; some interest from local officials
3	Batesburg-Leesville	Relatively low level of participation at forums; mixed reception from local officials

Public Opinion

Subjective assessment based on the following:

- Results of stakeholder interviews;
- Public feedback received during public forums; and
- Overall level of interest exhibited by the public.

Rank	Corridor	Comments
1	Camden	Offers best opportunity to transition from bus to rail over time; development could support both. Also, low freight traffic and Amtrak does not operate during commuter times
2	Batesburg-Leesville	Comparatively low freight traffic
3	Newberry	Relatively high freight traffic

Ease of Implementation

Subjective assessment based on several elements:

- Existing freight rail usage of corridor
 - The higher the freight traffic, the more difficult it will likely be to negotiate a shared-use agreement with the freight companies
- Ability to transition from a road-based enhanced bus service to a rail-based commuter service
 - Alternatives in which the road-based and rail-based operations are not located adjacent to each other decreases the opportunities for transit-oriented development

Rank	Corridor	Estimated Capital Cost
1	Camden	\$80,000,000
2	Batesburg-Leesville	\$92,000,000
3	Newberry	\$120,000,000

Summary

Ranking by criteria is summarized for each corridor:

	Camden	Newberry	Batesburg-Leesville
Potential Ridership (25%)	1	2	3
Access / Land Use (20%)	1	2	3
Cost of Implementation (25%)	1	3	2
Ease of Implementation (15%)	1	3	2
Public Opinion (15%)	2	1	3
Weighted Total (lowest is best)	1.15	2.25	2.60
Overall Rank	1	2	3

Comparison to Peer Cities

	Ridership (daily boardings)	Capital Cost
Camden Corridor	1,900 – 2,300	\$80 million
Newberry Corridor	1,200 – 1,500	\$120 million
Batesburg-Leesville Corridor	600 - 800	\$92 million
Albuquerque	not available	\$125 million ⁽¹⁾
Charlotte	2,500 – 5,000	\$275 - \$290 million
Nashville	1,500	\$40 million